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SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL EUN TU

SUBJECT: TURKEY WELCOMES OPENING OF EU CHAPTERS

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Classified By: POL Counselor Daniel O'Grady, for reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (C) The GOT readily welcomed the European Union's decision to open two accession chapters, "free movement of capital" and "information, society, and media," following the 6th Turkey-EU Accession Conference in Brussels. This brings the total number of opened chapters to ten. (Note: The EU froze eight chapters in 2006. France and Cyprus are reportedly blocking an additional five from being put on the table.) Although the EU has traditionally opened two chapters for negotiation with Turkey during each presidency term, MFA EU Political Affairs Section Chief Yaprak Alp said many GOT officials questioned whether the French Presidency would follow suit given strong GOF opposition to Turkey's membership. French Embassy Spokesman Bertrand Buchwalter told us that despite misgivings, the GOF had no choice but to find two chapters to open or risk putting an additional strain on the bilateral relationship. Having taken the last of the low hanging fruit, he opined, it will be difficult for the next EU President, the Czech Republic, to open the predicted chapters on "taxation" and "social policy and empowerment," which have much stricter technical benchmarks.

¶2. (C) The announcement comes on the heels of less-than-encouraging statements by the European Council and General Affairs and External Relations Council (GAERC) on Turkey's EU progress, particularly the obvious absence of the phrase "accession." Alp noted that the European Council failed to mention enlargement in the main text, choosing to acknowledge the issue in an annex as part of GAREC conditions. In addition, the GOT has taken exception to the comments regarding Cyprus. Alp said the GOT interprets the statement that Turkey should act in accordance with the relevant UNSC resolutions as an attempt to inject the EU into the Cyprus negotiations. Regardless, according to Alp, the MFA is optimistic that the upcoming Czech and Swedish Presidencies will revive "the supportive language that has been eroded since 2006."

¶3. (C) Comment: The GOT is relieved that progress with Brussels continues despite an obstreperous France having held the Presidency and concerns that Cyprus would be able to block the opening of new chapters due to recent incidents connected to offshore seismic exploration activities undertaken by the Cypriots and Greek in the eastern Mediterranean. Despite public rejection of implicit EU pressure on the need for further reform, Turkish officials fully realize that 2009 could be a make or break year for Turkey's accession process and that substantial reforms will be required to keep it on track. The European Council and GAERC statements, however, did little to alter diminishing

Turkish public support. With March municipal elections rapidly approaching, Turkish politicians will be unwilling to move forward any major reform initiative, let alone anything explicitly tied to legislative changes linked to the EU acquis. FM Babacan and the MFA will, however, adhere to the stock talking points that Turkey continues to make EU-mandated structural changes, such as adopting a commercial code, though it is not being sold as "technical" vice "political" changes to the to the Turkish public.

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Jeffrey